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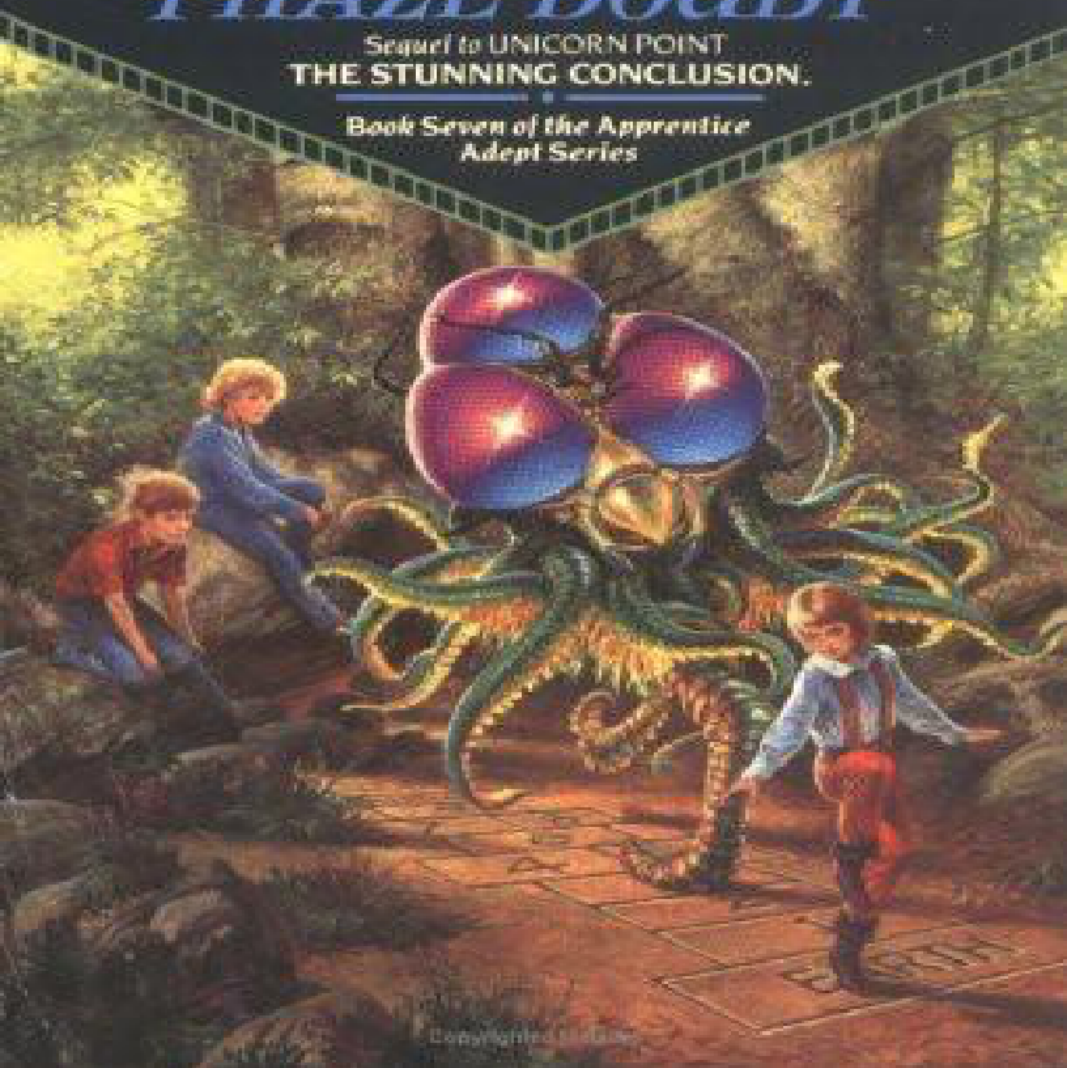
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIERS ANTHONY

PHAZE DOUBT

Sequel to UNICORN POINT
THE STUNNING CONCLUSION.

Book Seven of the Apprentice
Adept Series



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Phaze Doubt

The Apprentice Adept 7

Piers Anthony

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1 - Lysander

Lysander found his assigned seat in the shuttle as it commenced slow acceleration. The spaceship had been a liner, with individual cabins for each passenger, but the planetary shuttle was cramped in the manner of an atmospheric transport. Well, he was used to tight quarters, after his time in the laboratory.

He hesitated, glancing at the young human woman in the adjacent seat. She was in the process of getting out of her dress by working it up past her legs and buttocks. "Please, excuse me, if it is not an imposition—"

She looked up at him, pausing in her labor. She had short curly black hair and dark brown pupils, in those respects almost matching him. But what was coming into view below didn't match. "Am I embarrassing you?" she inquired brightly.

"No, I am most interested. Your form strikes me as pulchritudinous."

She blinked. "What?"

Evidently he had used the wrong term. "Of aesthetic outline. Comely. Subject to admiration. Incitive of sexual ambition."

She smiled. "Attractive?"

"Yes, thank you. That must be the operative term."

"You're not from this neighborhood," she remarked.

"This is a perceptive observation. Indeed I am not. But you—you are a native of the upcoming planet?"

"Yes. In a manner. I'm a serf. We don't wear clothing."

"Now I understand. I read the handbook. I will be a serf too, to earn what I need to be recognized as an independent individual. But would you be willing to exchange seats? I have little experience of planetfall and would like to gaze out the window."

"Oh, of course. I've seen it before." She got up and stepped to the center aisle, her dress remaining halfway up. Lysander took the seat she had occupied. Then she lifted her dress the rest of the way off, over her head, leaving only pink bra and panties. She was a well-

endowed female, quite appealing in that limited outfit. She folded the dress carefully and took the outer seat.

“Thank you,” Lysander said. “May I introduce myself? I am Lysander, from Planet Grenadier. I am a specialist in robot feed back circuitry.”

“Alyc,” she responded. “That’s A-L-Y-C, not ALICE. We serfs have little of our own except our names. I’m assistant what ever for Citizen Blue. Not in your class, I guess.”

“Class?”

“I’m not educated like you. I just help with housework and cooking and whatever, as I said. I never got beyond regular schooling.”

He smiled. “There may be a misunderstanding. I did not have schooling. I am an android.”

She stared at him momentarily, startled. “You’re joking!”

“My humor is limited, as it is in all my kind. My body was generated in the laboratory.”

“But androids are, well, not smart. You don’t talk at all like that!”

“Perhaps that is because my brain is fully organic. It was taken from a living creature and implanted in the android body in the manner of a cyborg. I was pre-educated in the laboratory so my only challenge was learning to use the body.”

“That’s fascinating!” she said. “I never heard of an android cyborg!”

“So as you understand, I am not in your class, not being a proper man. I have existed in this form only two years.”

She was gazing at him with increasing interest. “You haven’t had social experience on your own world?”

“I am not entirely certain what you mean. I am conversant with the appropriate modes for eating, eliminating, sleeping—“

“Man/woman,” she said. “Interaction.”

“I have been instructed on the mechanism for copulation.”

Alyc laughed. “Dating. Dancing. Kissing.”

“The mechanisms for relating the local calendar to current events, or —“ He saw by her expression that he was not reflecting her intent. “I suspect not.”

“Would you like to start with me? I mean, until you get into things in Phaze?”

“Phase? To be in phase, or out of phase?”

She laughed again. “Phaze. With a z. The magic part of Proton.”

“Magic? I think I must misunderstand.”

“So you don’t know about that. Well, I guess they haven’t bruited it about, offplanet. You’ll see. But what I meant was whether you would like to be my boyfriend, until you find a girl of your intellect?”

“But you are full human!” he protested. “My indoctrination is specific about the perils of miscegenation. I am obliged to inform any human person of my status as quasi-human.”

She turned earnestly to him. “I am a serf. And you will be too. We’re all equal, on Proton: humans, robots, cyborgs, androids, and aliens. All naked, too; will you be able to handle that?”

He frowned. “The social—the types interact? I assumed that the social interaction was confined android to android, and man to woman, in practice.”

“You are a man, Lysander, as I’m sure I can show you. The only forbidden interaction is disobedience to a Citizen. Of course serfs don’t normally marry, but they do have relationships. So—“ She looked at him questioningly.

“In that case, yes, I would like to be your social friend. As I remarked, your physique is attractive.”

“Oh, I’m so pleased!” she exclaimed. “I’m sure it will be very nice, the little time it lasts.”

“These affiliations are of limited duration?”

“With me they are. You see, I like smart men, and I can attract them at first, but they always leave me for smarter women.”

“I apologize in advance for doing that.”

She started to laugh, but changed her mind, remembering that he wasn't much for humor. "Well, let's make it count." She leaned over to kiss him.

"Secure belts for landing." It was the shuttle announcer system, giving warning of higher acceleration. The vessel had been accelerating at just under one gee throughout, backward, its jets toward the planet. In this manner it had reduced the momentum it had started with at the ship. But now it had to make planetfall, and that would require more than one gee.

"Never fails," Alyc said. "Just when things get interesting." She kissed him quickly and settled back into her seat, fishing for her harness.

Lysander heeded the directive, and snapped his own seat harness about his humanoid body, glancing around as he did so. The other passengers were all humanoid, most of them seeming to be fully human beings, some seeming to be robots. This was hardly surprising, since Proton was a human colony; few creatures of planets other than Earth found it compatible. Gravity, atmosphere, diurnal cycle, light intensity, and temperature range closely matched those of the colonizing planet.

"Is it all right if I watch the approach?" he asked. "I am of course interested in what you propose, but you will remain, while the vision of the landing will be fleeting."

"Of course it's all right," she said, after a slight hesitation. "I'll just hold your hand, meanwhile."

Lysander peered out of the old-fashioned porthole. They were approaching the planet obliquely, and he had an excellent view of it. He was indeed fascinated by it.

The odd thing about Planet Proton was that its South Pole pointed directly toward its sun, always. Most planets in most systems rotated in the planes of their ecliptics, so that their equators were warmest and their poles coldest. Some were skew, so that their poles were alternately heated as they proceeded through their years. But Proton acted as if it were on a fixed axle extending from the star, in seeming defiance of the laws of physics.

The acceleration increased. Gee rose to about 1.5. His right hand felt odd. He tore his eyes away from the porthole and looked at it.

Alyc was holding his arm to her bosom and kissing his hand. It was

warmth of her breath on his fingers that had distracted him. Relieved that it was nothing serious—sometimes this body reacted in odd ways to stress, and 1.5 gee was a type of stress—he returned his gaze to the porthole.

What Lysander found hard to figure was how the planet maintained a regular day-night cycle. With the sunlight coming always toward the South Pole, there should be no changes; the southern hemisphere should always be day, the northern hemisphere night. Yet that was not the case. The planet acted as if the light were turned at right angles, and it cast its night shadow to the side. The manual indicated that scientists had never been able to agree exactly how this was possible, but it was so. The prevailing theory of the moment was that the planet acted with respect to light like a black hole, bending the light ninety degrees without affecting anything else. This left formidable questions unanswered, but was the best that was offered. Apparently no competent local study had been undertaken to resolve the mystery.

Then the shuttle changed orientation. The planet seemed to swing back and out of sight. They were coming down to the surface. There was nothing of interest to be seen now.

Alyc still had his hand. She was licking it. Lysander tried to remember whether this was normal procedure, but found no applicable facet. He had to assume that it was within tolerance for the species.

Alyc saw him looking. “I’m sorry,” she said. “High-gee makes me nervous.” She removed her mouth, but did not let go of his hand.

A stress reaction. He filed the information in a facet. Others might have different mechanisms of coping. Still, it was possible that it was not the mere availability of more intelligent companions that caused males to leave this woman.

The gee increased. Then there was a bump, and the gee reverted to one. They were down.

Alyc relaxed. She released Lysander’s hand. “I feel so much safer on solid land,” she said. “Low-gee or high-gee just—” She shrugged. Then she touched the center of the bra, and it separated and fell away. “We might as well wait for the others to clear,” she said, nodding her head at the people now stepping into the aisle.

Lysander noted that a number of the others had done as Alyc had, and were now naked. They carried their clothing bundled under their

arms. They seemed to have no luggage.

Alyc drew up her legs, bending the knees. In a moment she had worked the panties off. "You might as well strip here," she said. "That way, they'll think you're a returning serf, like me, and you won't have to go through the indoctrination routine."

Lysander nodded. He preferred to avoid attention. He started to get out of his clothes, awkwardly, in the seat.

Alyc jumped to help him. Her hands touched his body caressingly, not shying away from the genital region.

"I am not certain this is wise," he said.

"Oh, no, it's better to strip now," she assured him.

"The presence of your hands is causing a reaction," he explained.

"Oh, that's right—you're new here. You think naked is sexy!"

"I was under that impression. Am I mistaken?"

"Yes, here. Serfs aren't sexy, they're dull. We really have to work at it to get sexy. Clothing helps a lot; I got so heated up the first time I went offplanet—" She shrugged again. "But I know it's the other way around, with you. I can take care of it, though. Just get naked so I can —"

He realized that she intended to proceed to a sexual engagement. Human interest in the act declined after it had been indulged. But he foresaw points of awkwardness, because he understood that such an act was normally done in a private place, and would attract some attention if done publicly. Also, his inexperience was likely to contribute to miscues. It would be better to avoid it at this time.

However, he did not wish to walk out of the ship in an obvious state of sexual excitement; that too might attract attention.

He would have to draw on his true nature to turn it off. "I think I am adapting to the culture," he said. "Allow me a moment."

"If you wish." She seemed disappointed.

He reverted to his core facet. Now he saw things as he would if in his natural body, rather than as the humanoid body did. He opened the two eye segments available and looked at the woman.

She was completely repulsive. A mat of long fur sprouted from the top and rear of her head to dangle around the auditory flaps and the jaw bone, tufts of it coiling of their own accord. Her breathing orifice projected, and her eyes were rounded and set in sockets. Assorted white teeth showed within the peeling gash of her sustenance intake orifice. Substantial bags of flesh hung around her front. She had two massive upper limbs and a bifurcate base.

He shut off the eyes; the awful vision was too strong. If he allowed it to go further, he would be unable to function in this alien society, and therefore unable to pursue his mission.

He stood and quickly completed the disrobing. He had no sexual interest in the female now. He hoped he would be able to damp down the vision of her fleshy nature when the time came, as it inevitably would, to indulge in the way she preferred.

"I guess you did adapt," Alyc said. "Well, maybe some other time. It isn't too good in a shuttle, anyway, I think." She evidently would have been glad to make a trial of it, however.

"Yes. Now I must enter the city and seek employment."

"You don't have a job yet?" she asked.

"I understand that employment is inevitable. Was I required to achieve it before coming?"

"Oh, no! I just thought maybe you had been brought in for your expertise. A special assignment."

"No, I merely wish to achieve a suitable situation, in a culture that accepts androids more readily than does my own."

"Then maybe you can apply for work with Citizen Blue!" she exclaimed, delighted. "He's a good employer, really he is! He's very generous. Most Citizens don't allow their serfs offplanet until their terms are up and they have to go, forever, but he let me travel."

Lysander frowned, though this was exactly what he wished. "Wouldn't that be a conflict of interest?"

She was preceding him down the aisle, her fleshy posterior shifting its masses in ways that threatened to alienate him again. He focused his two eyes on her face as it turned halfway back toward him.

"Conflict?" she asked, perplexed.

“If you and I are to have an association, wouldn’t that disallow employment by the same Citizen?”

She laughed, as she so readily did. “No way! Citizens don’t care about serf interactions. Just so long as they do what they’re told. The only trouble is when a Citizen wants a serf-girl for sex and doesn’t want anyone else using her. But Blue isn’t like that; he’s true to his wife, as he has been for twenty years.”

“She must be a remarkable woman.”

“She’s a robot. They have a son.” She paused, waiting for his reaction.

He made it, as they left the shuttle and passed into the interior chamber of the spaceport. “A robot had a son?”

“The son’s a robot too,” she explained. “Her name is Sheen, and his is Mach. Mach-Sheen, Machine, you see; it’s sort of a pun, only nobody laughs. And he’s married to an alien female, and they have a daughter, Nepe. Only it’s more complicated than that.”

“I think that’s as complicated as I can assimilate,” Lysander said ruefully. He glanced around the large chamber. Sure enough, only the clothed parties were being challenged; the naked ones were ignored. “So you believe that Citizen Blue might employ me, if he has use for my abilities?”

“He sure might!” she said enthusiastically. “I can ask him for you!”

“Is this normal procedure? I understand that I should register for employment, and that if I did not obtain it within three days I would be summarily dismissed from the planet. I admit this is a concern.”

“You register, but Blue will ask for you, if I ask him, maybe,” she said.

“In that case, by all means ask him,” Lysander agreed.

“Oh, this is working out so well!” she said, taking his hand and holding it as they walked side by side.

Lysander was coming to understand better why Alyc’s liaisons tended to be brief. She was quite open, and perhaps possessive, offering her wares too rapidly, so that her store was quickly exhausted. But this was extremely convenient now. He had received instruction in the laboratory, but had no direct experience, so her forward attitude enabled him to learn quickly without a great risk of error.

She brought him to a registration desk at the spaceport. "Check in here, and they'll give you a three-day permit," she explained. "Then I'll take you to Blue."

He approached the desk. "May I register for employment?"

The naked woman behind the desk glanced at him, bored. "Name and planet of origin?"

"Lysander of Grenadier."

She glanced at a terminal screen. "Right. Android. Your specialties are games and computer circuitry. Put your eyes to the window."

She had a detail wrong, but it seemed expedient to let it pass. He was trained in robotic feedback circuitry, which related to programming rather than hardware.

There was a panel with a scanning window. He put his face to it, knowing that the scanner would record his retinal patterns and match them to those of his listed identity. Such identification could be counterfeited only by the replacement of the eyeballs, which was more trouble than the average intruder would care to undertake. Androids were standardized in many respects, including the immune system, so they could take eyeball transplants more readily than full humans could. But all android retinal patterns were registered, so unless the paperwork was in order, a transplant was useless for any purpose other than correcting a defect in vision.

"Are you familiar with local protocol?" the woman asked as he stepped away from the window. The scan had checked, of course.

"I believe so. I go naked, address every Citizen as sir, and do what I'm told."

"There are details. Are you aware, for example, that magic is operative here?"

"Prestidigitation is a game skill I have developed. It will be interesting to compare local techniques."

The woman's mouth turned wry. "This is more than that. Perhaps you should take the indoctrination course."

"I'm helping him," Alyc put in. "I'm Alyc, employee of Citizen Blue. May I call the Citizen now?"

"If you wish." The woman turned a videophone screen toward her.

"Alyc calling Citizen Blue," she said to the screen.

The clerk's eyebrow elevated. "You expect him to answer you direct?"

A woman's face appeared on the screen. Her eyes were green and her hair brown, fading to bleached strands at her shoulders. The lines about her face and neck indicated that she was no young, but she remained beautiful. "You're back, Alyc!" she said with evident pleasure. "Was it a good trip?"

"Yes, Sheen. But funny wearing clothes. I'm glad to be back Could—could I talk to the Citizen, please?"

The clerk made a tiny shake of her head at this audacity. I was obvious that smart serfs did not push their luck like this.

A man's face came on the screen. There was no question of his age; he was at least in his fifties, but his eyes were alert. The collar of a shirt was visible at the base of the picture; he was clothed, therefore a Citizen. "Yes, Alyc."

The clerk's jaw dropped slightly. She turned away.

"Sir, I met a man on the ship back, and maybe you could hire him."

The Citizen's countenance quirked in what was becoming of Lysander a familiar expression in those who spoke to Alyc: that one assumed when dealing with a child or harmless animal that had intruded on the carpet. "Perhaps. Who is he?"

"Lysander. He knows about computers and games, though—"

"He is present?"

"Right here, sir," she said eagerly, moving aside so that the Citizen could look at Lysander.

Blue nodded. "No promise, Alyc. But bring him here."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" she exclaimed, actually jumping in her excitement. But the Citizen's glance at Lysander, as the image faded on the screen, was disconcertingly sharp. This was going to be far more chancy than the registration had been!

Alyc led him out of the spaceport to a public transport car. It was half

filled with naked humanoids, with a few machines of various configurations. All the human beings were in good health, none fat; it was obvious that the governing Citizens did not encourage over-indulgence. In fact, this seemed to be a well-run planet.

“About magic,” Lysander said. “What did the clerk mean about that? You mentioned it on the shuttle but did not clarify your reference.”

“About a year ago the frames merged,” Alyc said brightly. “Citizen Blue did it, to stop the Contrary Citizens from taking over and ruining everything. That was just before I came here, so I don’t know how it was before, but it certainly is nice now. Anyway, science works, and magic works. It’s a lot of fun.”

“My education, as I said, was programmed. My brain was in effect force-fed with the language of this planet and the general nature of the galaxy, and the necessary skills of survival were inculcated. Perhaps I missed something. Magic is generally known as a fraud, something that can not possibly operate as claimed. It is nonsensical by definition. Therefore I wish to know what is meant by the term here, as it can not be what I mean by it.”

She smiled knowingly. “Brother, have you got a learning experience coming!”

“You propose to show me actual magic?”

“Well, not me personally. It’s mostly only those who have been here a long time who can do it, especially the mergees. But I’m sure—“

“Mergees?”

“Oh, this gets complicated! You see, there were these two frames, Proton and Phaze—with the z, remember?—and they were sort of separated, and in one science worked and in the other magic worked. The people, a lot of them were the same, I mean people in Proton had other selves in Phaze, who did magic. But then they merged, and all the people merged too, and now they—well, wait till you meet Mach/Bane and Fleta/Agape!”

“MacBane and Fleta who?”

“They—you won’t believe me until you see it. Meanwhile just take my word: there’s magic here now, because the land; merged too. But they say a lot of it only works once, so they don’t do it much, except for the natural shape changing.”

“I will take your word,” Lysander said, hoping she did not catch the cynicism. She had not seemed crazy before! In due course they arrived at the section of the city that housed Citizen Blue’s estate. Lysander was surprised to find it ordinary; there was no ostentation. His respect for the Citizen grew, and his dismay; he was not at all sure he could fool this man.

“You look nervous,” Alyc remarked. “I know how it is! I was so scared when I first came here I thought I’d do something, in my pants—and I didn’t have any. But Blue is just great; you’ll like him.”

Lysander doubted it.

“And we can be together,” she continued cheerily. “I’ll show you around everywhere. Blue does that; he lets newcomers break in easy.”

That was more appealing. The longer he had before he had to get serious about his mission, the better it would be.

He assumed that they would be admitted to some outer chamber, where the citizen would interview him by video. This was not the case. They were ushered instead into the main apartment, where Citizen Blue and Sheen stood waiting.

Sheen stepped forward and hugged Alyc as if she were a dear friend. Sheen was a robot, but this was hardly apparent; she seemed as womanly as it was possible to be.

“Did you have a nice visit home, dear?” Sheen inquired.

“Yes!” Alyc agreed with her customary vigor. “Mom told me I needed to eat more, I was thin as a reed!” This was laughable; she was about as well fleshed as she could be without sacrificing sex appeal.

“Don’t listen to her,” Sheen said, smiling. “Men prefer thee. Speaking of which—this is your new young man?” Her eyes turned to Lysander.

“Yes—as of an hour past,” Lysander said. “She has been helping me get adapted.”

“She does that,” Sheen agreed. She turned back to Alyc. “Let’s go get reacquainted with Agnes. The men may want to talk.”

The two naked women walked to another room, leaving Lysander with the Citizen. Citizen Blue was a tiny man, a head shorter than average, though not so small as to be a dwarf. He wore an open shirt and

casual trousers, with slipper-type shoes. On any other humanoid planet he would have been dismissed as a man of no consequence. Here the clothing made him a figure of stature.

Yet even if Blue had been naked, his bearing would have set him apart. The man had power, and it seemed to imbue him with a presence that was not to be ignored. Lysander presumed that this was typical of Citizens in general, but perhaps especially of this one, because he knew that Blue was not just any Citizen. He was the Citizen—the leading figure of the planet. That was why his ready accessibility was surprising. Surely there were bodyguards watching, or killer laser beams oriented on the visitor; the Citizen would not leave himself open to the mischief of a stranger.

“Sit down, Lysander,” Blue said, and took a seat himself.

Lysander sat opposite, in one of the simple plastic chairs. This was no social visit; it was an employment interview. It was also, more critically, a test. If Blue had any notion of Lysander’s true mission—

“Your meeting with Alyc was no coincidence,” the Citizen said.

And there it was, already. “No, sir,” Lysander agreed.

“Please explain.”

“I have special training. My planet—the authorities there-wish to upgrade their computer technology, especially with regard to self-willed robots. They feel that solid experience with advanced systems should help. When they discovered that a servant of a family including two self-willed robots was returning to Proton, they felt the opportunity was too good to be allowed to pass. So they arranged for me to be seated beside that servant, who was known to be friendly to handsome men.”

“And you were created handsome,” Blue said.

“Yes, sir. My body is android, crafted on ideal humanoid lines. My brain is animal, so that I do not suffer the typical dysfunction of androids.”

“You are using Alyc as an avenue to employment here?”

“No, sir. That is, the intent was to befriend her, and so have better access to those who are in a position to guarantee my employment in my specialty. It was known that you support your employees, so if you

felt her situation would be improved by my retention as a serf on this planet, you would arrange it. But actual employment by you—“

“She surprised you by being too helpful,” Blue said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Your background checks out. We can use you. But I take exception to the mechanism of your acquaintance with Alyc. She is vulnerable to exploitation, especially by a male such as yourself. She wears her heart on her sleeve, as one of our ancient sayings puts it, but she is not an unworthy person. What are your intentions toward her?”

“I have no present emotional commitment, sir. If you direct me to disassociate with her, I will do so.”

“I do not make directives of that nature.”

“Then I would prefer to explore the association she proffers, sir. I am inexperienced in social and sexual interactions, as I was crafted two years ago and have spent the majority of my awareness in training. I believe she could show me much I lack.”

“And when you have had the experience?”

“She has informed me that her associations are generally brief, because men come to prefer more intelligent women. My interest is in my specialty rather than in any social situation. I see no reason to break with her unless that is her preference.”

“These things are not necessarily predictable,” the Citizen said. “I loved a human woman, but later lost that love, and associated with Sheen instead. If your interest changes, you should do as you wish. I only ask that you give Alyc a fair chance, and if you have occasion to change women, that you set her down gently.”

“I shall do that, sir.”

“Then go and tour the planet,” Blue said. “Alyc will show you the landmarks. Familiarize yourself with our conventions before settling down to your specialty.”

“But sir, with all due respect, I have only three days to find employment. If I squander it—“

Blue silenced him with a slightly elevated hand. “I apologize,

Lysander. I thought you understood. You have been registered as my employee. My suggestion was in the nature of a directive.”

Lysander stared at him, for the moment too surprised to speak.

The Citizen smiled. “You are new here. That is why you need to familiarize yourself with our culture. Let me anticipate Alyc with this one caution: when a Citizen speaks to you, take him literally. Never protest the case, unless you are sure you know something he doesn’t which might affect the case. In all other circumstances, simply ignore a Citizen, except to stay out of his way.

“I apologize for transgressing, sir,” Lysander said, embarrassed.

“And don’t apologize to a Citizen; that presumes sufficient status to make it meaningful.”

“Yes, sir,” Lysander said, embarrassed again.

“And do not speak at all unless he requires it of you.”

Lysander was silent.

Blue laughed. “There is no offense, Lysander. Merely a demonstration. Come, we shall join the ladies.” He got up, and Lysander immediately stood also.

Blue glanced at him. “Did I tell you to stand?”

“No, sir,” Lysander said hastily, sitting down again.

“But it was implied. I invited you to join the ladies, which you would find awkward to do if you remained seated. But if you stood merely because I did, you were in error.”

Lysander stood again, silently. He suspected he was flushing the full length of his body.

Blue clapped him on the shoulder. “A few days with Alyc will enable you to get everything straight. But your specialty may attract the interest of other Citizens, or I may contact you myself in that period, and I would not want to be embarrassed by having an employee who seemed uncertain of relevant protocol. I can not say I approve of all the details of our system, but others do, and that makes appearances important. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Exactly.” Blue showed the way to the other room.

An older maid was serving a beverage at a table. “This is Agnes, maid and friend,” Blue said. “In the absence of myself and my wife, she is the ranking figure of this household, and you will honor any request she makes of you.”

Lysander nodded to Agnes, but did not speak. They took places at the table.

Alyc glanced at the Citizen as if wanting to say something. Blue nodded. “Sir, Lysander doesn’t believe in magic.”

The Citizen frowned. “And you had the audacity to associate with him?”

Sheen smiled. Lysander, taking his cue from her, smiled also.

“Yes, sir,” Alyc said, abashed. “I thought maybe—“

“This sounds like a job for my granddaughter,” Blue said.

“Yes, sir.”

“You can spare him for an hour?”

“Yes, sir!” Alyc said, happy.

“But you know he will never be the same, once Nepe finishes with him.”

“Don’t tease her, dear,” Sheen reproved Blue. He smiled. It was obvious that Alyc was quite satisfied to be teased by this man.

The Citizen nodded to Agnes, who left the room. Then they settled down to their beverage, which turned out to be pseudo-wine. This had the flavor and texture of something vintage, but no alcoholic content. Lysander was interested to see that Sheen drank it too. She was the perfect woman, machine though she was.

Lysander saw a problem on the horizon. These were likeable people, and he liked them. That was apt to be awkward, when he had to act.

2 - Magic

The Citizen's granddaughter Nepe showed up before they finished their wine. She was a little girl, nine years old, naked in the serf manner, with flouncing brown hair covering her ears. She dashed up to Citizen Blue for a hug, her hair flying out with the vigor of her motion, then spied the visitor and abruptly turned formal. "You summoned me, sir?"

"I have hired Lysander," Blue said, indicating him. "He does not believe in magic."

Slowly the girl's head turned toward Lysander. She smiled impishly. "We shall have to do something about that," she said, with an odd certainty.

"Go with Nepe," the Citizen said to Lysander.

Without a word, Lysander got up and approached the child. She extended her hand, and he reached out to take it—and paused, startled.

Her arm terminated in a mass of squirming tentacles.

Oh—she was a shape changer. There were several galactic species that could change their forms, and some of them were surely represented here. If this was the nature of the "magic," he need have little concern.

He took the "hand" without flinching, knowing that it was someone's notion of a joke or an initiation.

Suddenly they were standing in a field. Pleasant gray clouds drifted overhead, and sunlight brightened the waving grass. There was no evidence that the rays of the sun were bent at right angles; they seemed to descend from almost overhead, this being midday. But this amounted to an optical illusion. Just as a person saw the reflection in a mirror as an extension of the local scene beyond the mirror, he saw the sun where it seemed to belong. It was actually at right angles, to the south.

"You hungry, Lysander?" the child inquired in a different voice.

He glanced sharply down. He was now holding the hand of a boy! A tousle-headed lad clothed in black jacket and trousers, with blue socks

and sneakers.

Oh: the girl had shape-changed again, forming her body surface into the appearance of clothing and quite possibly the semblance of masculinity beneath it. Still no magic. However, the abrupt change of scene still mystified him. How had that effect been arranged?

But he had to play the game. He affected unconcern. “Yes, actually. Is there suitable food here?”

“There’s a melon tree not far off, but it’s guarded by a dragon.”

“I’d like to see this dragon,” Lysander said. Indeed, he was curious about what the child would come up with next. He had to concede that this was an excellent demonstration.

“I’ll give you a ride. But you’d better put on some clothing. Outside the domes it’s Phaze now.”

Suddenly Lysander was clothed. Shirt, trousers, shoes—everything. It had happened like magic.

Uh-oh. The child was still trying to trick him.

There was a musical honk. He looked—and saw a horse standing beside him. No, not a horse—a unicorn, with a long spiraled horn set in its forehead. Where was Nepe?

The animal honked again, gesturing with its horn toward its own back. Actually it was male, and the honk came from the horn itself, sounding like a woodwind instrument. If this was a simulation, as seemed to be the case, it was a clever one!

Well, he would continue to play along. He stepped toward the animal. “I’m not much at riding,” he said. He had ridden horses, as it was an aspect of his gameplaying practice, but those had been tame and trained. He feared this creature was neither. He was also used to a saddle; bareback was more of a challenge. But if that was the way it was, so be it.

He grabbed a handful of mane and jumped, swinging a leg up and over. He half expected to get dumped as the animal bolted, but it remained still. Only when he was securely mounted did it move, and then carefully, so that he had no trouble keeping his seat.

The unicorn picked up speed, going into a trot. Then it played music

through its horn: an actual melody. Lysander hung on and listened, amazed. He was unable to ascertain how such special effects were being accomplished.

They approached a grove of trees. Sure enough, one of them bore huge fruit that looked like melons—and there was a monstrous winged serpent snoozing around its base. The creature woke and hissed at them, sending up a cloud of smoke.

Lysander realized that such a creature could readily be mocked up with plastic and pseudoflesh, but the heat of its breath would still be dangerous. “Maybe I’ll pass on the melon,” he said.

The unicorn shrugged. Then it spouted huge wings, pumped them, leaped, and became airborne. Lysander clung to its back, alarmed. The ground was now receding at an astonishing rate. Magic? It was getting difficult to doubt!

They approached a purple mountain. The thing was literally purple, even at close range; the foliage of the trees had a purplish cast. He had seen a map of Proton on which was marked PURPLE MOUNTAINS, but he had assumed that was figurative.

A gross bird launched from a tall tree. It flew up to intercept the flying unicorn. Lysander tried to judge what kind it was. He knew most of the Earth types that would have been brought here with the human colonists, but this ungainly thing with the huge head and dangling tresses—

It was a harpy! A mythical creature, part vulture and part human woman. No such creature existed, and even if it did, it would hardly be able to fly, any more than the unicorn could. The dynamics were all wrong.

Magic? It was a good show!

“Sheer off! Sheer off, imbecile!” the harpy screeched. “Think I want a ‘corn in my tree?”

The unicorn sounded a brief melody. The harpy listened. “Oh. Sorry, Flach,” she screeched. “I should have recognized thee. I were looking at the handsome man. Well, land at the foot and we’ll talk.”

The unicorn descended, and in a moment came to a four-point landing at the base of the tree. Lysander dismounted, and the boy reappeared. Then the harpy came down and landed somewhat clumsily on the

ground beside them. Her face and breasts were young, but her wings and talons destroyed any attractiveness she might have had for a human man.

Then she changed form, and became a young woman, tall and slender. Her face was the same, and probably her bosom, which was now covered by a feathery gown. “Well, what brings you here, Flach?” she inquired.

“This be Lysander,” the boy said. “He believes not in magic.”

The woman eyed him speculatively. “New to this planet?” she inquired.

Lysander nodded. “I arrived about an hour ago. I admit to being confused.”

“Hi. I’m Echo. My better half is Oche.” She extended her hand.

He took it. “I don’t wish to be impolite, but it has been my understanding that there is no such thing as magic.”

She nodded. “So Flach is showing you. That figures.”

“Actually, a little girl was showing me. I am not certain what—“ He broke off, for now Nepe was standing before him, dressed in a pinafore, her wild hair neatly braided.

“It’s hard to get used to, at first,” Echo said. “I didn’t believe, until the frames merged, and then I had one hell of an adjustment to make. How would you like to turn into a harpy without warning?”

“I would find that awkward,” Lysander agreed.

“You bet! But you have it easy, because you’re not native, so you didn’t have to merge with your opposite.”

“You and the harpy are the same individual?”

“Just as Flach and Nepe are,” Echo said. “You see, when there were two frames, one was science, the other magic, and long-term residents were represented in both. When they merged, so did the folk, and I’m telling you, it was carnage for a time! But now most of us have made the adjustment. When we go into the domes, we strip down and are serfs; outside we’re in Phaze. Then we dress and speak in the Phaze manner, and do whatever magic we can. It’s a pretty good

combination, actually.”

“I don’t wish to impose, but would you object to providing more evidence? Could you, for example, change forms if I were holding you?”

She eyed him again. “That’s the neatest come-on line I’ve heard yet! Sure, hold me, handsome.” She stepped into his arms and kissed him.

He closed his arms around her, less interested in the kiss than in the mechanism of the change. He held her firmly—and then found himself with an armful of feathers. She had become the harpy, her lips still touching his. He was so surprised he let go.

She fell away, and had to flap her wings to recover before she hit the ground. “Thou didst drop me, thou dork!” she screeched. There was the tinkle of Nepe’s laughter.

If this wasn’t supernatural, it was a device beyond his reckoning. Echo had felt every inch the human woman—and she had been within his grasp as she changed.

“Let me try again,” he said. He squatted, and grabbed her two bird legs. “Change back.”

Abruptly he was holding on to one knee and one thigh. Both were definitely human.

“Satisfied?” Nepe asked. “Or do you want to squeeze her gams some more?”

Hastily he let go, though his human orientation was returning, and he found the legs interesting. “If it isn’t magic, it’s beyond me,” he confessed.

“It’s science,” Echo said. “I’m a cyborg. See, my body’s inanimate.” She opened her robe, exposing her breasts. She touched the right one, and it swung out from her torso to reveal a hollow cavity instead of mammary glands. “But Oche, she’s magic, all right.”

“I’ll take thee to the wolves,” Flach said, having changed without notice.

“Wolves? I’d rather not.”

But the lad was determined. “Take my hand; I’ll conjure thee to the

Pack.”

With resignation, Lysander reached for the hand. “Come see me some time when you’re not busy, handsome,” Echo said. “I work for Citizen Powell, when I’m on duty in Proton. You?”

“Citizen Blue,” he said.

“You’re lucky!”

Then his hand made contact—and the scene changed.

They stood at the edge of a lovely valley whose Mower-specked expanse led down to a small meandering stream. A herd of horses were grazing, guarded by a single stallion pacing the perimeter. Horses? No, unicorns; each had its horn, and the colors were beyond anything seen on ordinary equines.

The stallion galloped up. He had a bright blue coat and red “socks” on his hind legs. As he moved, he played music on his horn, sounding very like a mellow saxophone.

The unicorn who had carried Lysander reappeared. This one had a black coat and blue hind socks, seeming to have a family resemblance to the stallion. He played a return melody, his flute-like theme prettily counterpointing the saxophone.

Then both animals became human, the change like the flick of an image on a computer screen. The boy was familiar, but the man was not. He had black hair and a black suit, with blue socks, and was of mature age. He looked tough.

The man eyed Lysander. “My grand-nephew tells me that thou be a new employee of Blue, and that thou hast difficulty assimilating our culture.”

“Correct. I had understood that magic was mainly illusion.”

“Flach will happily demonstrate magical illusion!” the man said. As he spoke, a disembodied eye appeared in the air behind him, the white of it grotesquely veined. A second eye formed beside it, and the two focused on Lysander. Slowly the right one winked. “But not now,” the man said sternly, without turning. The eyes vanished. “I suspect thy best course be to assume that what thou seest be valid, until thou dost become convinced. Ignorance be lethal, here.”

“I believe that, sir.”

The man frowned. “Oh, aye, thou seest me clothed, so dost assume I be a Citizen. Nay, in Phaze there be no Citizens. When the mergence came, we had to compromise in a number o’ ways, because some folk were merged and others had no other selves, and the status o’ selves could be different in the frames. So—” He paused. “Be I confusing you?”

“Yes,” Lysander admitted.

The unicorn reappeared, and blew a loud note. Immediately there was the sweet tinkle of bells, and a mare broke from the Herd. Her coat was a deep red verging on purple, and her mane rippled iridescently. She was an astonishing and beautiful creature.

Then she became a blue heron, and flew toward them. Soon she landed, becoming a unicorn as her feet touched ground. She tinkled her bells again questioningly—but the sound was actually from her horn.

The stallion played another brief melody. The mare’s head angled so that one eye could orient on Lysander.

“Go with Belle,” Flach said. “Great-Uncle Clip wants to talk with me.”

“You mean, ride her?”

“If thou dost wish,” the boy said. “Oh—she will explain about the mergence.”

“But I can’t understand bells!”

“Now thou canst,” Flach said.

Lysander chose not to argue. He presumed there was some point to all this. His job was to go along, learning what he needed to. Certainly what he was experiencing was amazing, and the surprises showed no signs of abating.

He approached the beautiful mare. Up close he saw that she was old, like the stallion; flecks of gray showed in her hide. “May I ride you, Belle?” he asked.

Her bell sounded. “Aye.”

“Thank you.” He climbed on her back.

Then he did a doubletake. "I understood you!" he exclaimed.

She laughed with the pealing of bells. "Flach did it. He be the Unicorn Adept. We o' the Herd be proud o' him." She started walking, leaving the man and boy behind.

"Unicorn Adept?"

The bells tinkled again, melodiously. "Clip asked me to clarify our system for thee." These were not her precise words; rather, he was translating the sounds into his own sentences, as he was coming to understand the dialect of Phaze. It didn't matter; he understood her perfectly. It was apparent that any further effort to resist acceptance of magic was likely to be futile; it was the readiest explanation for what was going on. "There were two frames, one magic, the other science. We unicorns lived in magic Phaze, while the Citizens and serfs lived in science Proton, in their domes, because they had polluted all the air and ruined the land. Many o' us had other selves, but we could cross o'er not."

"Let me see whether I understand," he said. "You were a unicorn, and some person in Proton was the same as you?"

"Nay, some mare," she tinkled. "I have no human form; it were not one I chose. We unicorns can usually learn two other forms, and I chose the heron and the cat. Clip chose man and hawk. So we trot together, and we fly together, but when I go to Proton with him he be a man and I be a horse. But I like it there not, so I remain out on the range."

"The frames merged, and now the domes are Proton, and the outside land is Phaze?"

"Aye, by agreement. So when a Citizen steps outside, he assumes his Phaze form. If he be Adept, he has great power, but most o' them be just ordinary folk. So the Proton folk mostly stay in their domes, and we Phaze folk remain mostly outside. Many of us have no opposite selves anyway, so it be easier. Things really changed not much, after the mergence settled down, except that the Adept Stile gained power."

"Who?"

"The Adepts be the ones with much magic. They be mostly human, but the Red Adept be a troll, and the Unicorn Adept be pan unicorn. The Blue Adept always supported the unicorns, and the werewolves and vampires, so—"

“But you named a Stile Adept.”

“He were the Blue Adept, but he changed selves with Stile, and now he be Citizen Blue, and Stile be the Adept.”

“Oh—so Nepe’s grandfather—“

“Aye,” she tinkled. “Clip’s sister Neysa had a filly, Fleta, who mated with Blue’s son Mach, the rovo—“

“What?”

“In Proton there be rovots,” she tinkled patiently. “Like golems, only made o’ metal. Nepe be their child, so she be—“

“Wait! Wait! I’m all confused. I thought the frames were separate. How could a unicorn filly mate with a robot? Even if it were possible physically, they were in opposite frames!”

“Mach crossed o’er, and took Bane’s body, here, and loved Fleta. Their child be Flach. Bane crossed to Proton, and took Mach’s body, and married Agape the alien, and their child be Nepe. But when the murgence came—“

“They became the same!” Lysander exclaimed, the light dawning. “Stile and Blue are the same, and their sons are the same, and their grandchildren! But—“ He broke off, troubled by another aspect.

“One child be male and one be female,” she tinkled, understanding. “We believed it not either, but it be so. That unbelief were critical in Stile’s victory.”

“Just what was this victory? How did it relate to the merging of the frames?”

“The Adverse Adepts were gaining power, and were in league with the Contrary Citizens, and the Purple Adept sought to kill Stile and assume power. But Blue summoned the Platinum Flute, and Clef to play it, and they piped the frames together. Blue and Stile merged and liked each other, and Fleta and Agape liked each other, and Flach and Nepe, for all were good folk. But the bad Adepts and Citizens were mean folk, each out for himself alone, not sharing power, and they could stand their other selves not, and fell in torment struggling with themselves. By the time they came to accommodation with their opposites, the good folk were firmly in power. Now it be verging on the golden age, for Stile and Blue be reconciled with their sons Mach

and Bane and their grandchildren Flach and Nepe, and all value the land and creatures. Ne'er again will evil govern either frame."

"But how can magic work here, when it is unknown in the rest of the galaxy?"

"It be the Phazite," she tinkled. "The magic rock 'neath the mountains. It be the source o' magic and energy. The bad Citizens were mining it, and selling it, and depleting it, so our magic were less. They cared for our welfare not, any more than they did for the air they spoiled before. But Stile and Blue stopped them, and now little rock goes out."

"This rock provides magic and energy?"

"Aye. The Proton ships use it and the rovots and 'chines, and it be best in the galaxy. The Citizens were getting much wealth, but we were fading." She made a merry serenade of bells. "No more!"

Abruptly she halted. "What's the matter?" Lysander asked.

"A goblin, spying on us!" she tinkled. "Do thou dismount; needs must I drive him out."

Lysander quickly got off. Then she was a black panther, bounding into the brush.

There was a swirl of motion, and something like a little man leaped up and dodged behind a tree. The panther circled the tree, but evidently the goblin was gone.

The big cat came back. The beautiful unicorn reappeared. "They have no business here," she tinkled indignantly. "These be 'Corn Demesnes."

Evidently so. Lysander remounted, and they continued on around the grazing herd. By the time they returned to the boy and stallion, the two had evidently finished their conversation. Indeed, the unicorn was grazing again, and the lad was playing with tiny clouds, making the black one chase the white one in crazy patterns just above the ground. When the two collided, there was a crack of thunder, and flare of lightning, and a bucket of water drenched the soil.

The boy became the unicorn. "We thank thee for thy help, Belle," Flach piped politely. Lysander seemed to understand all music talk now, and he knew he wasn't imagining it.

“Welcome, Adept,” Belle tinkled. “It be fun to rehearse the history. Tell the Lady we miss her.”

“Aye, I’ll nag her!” the boy said zestfully, reappearing. “Or I will,” the girl Nepe added. The changes seemed instant; Lysander could detect no transition. What else could it be but magic?

Then Nepe extended her hand. Lysander took it, knowing what was coming.

Sure enough, the scene changed. They were standing at the edge of a forest clearing where a number of wolves were lying. The wolves jumped up, smelling the intrusion—and beside Lysander was another wolf. “Tear him not, brothers!” Flach growled, this form of communication also now comprehensible. “I be showing him magic at Blue’s behest.”

A wolf approached Lysander—and abruptly became a woman. She was of indeterminate human age, no young innocent but also not old. “For thee, Flach, we honor this. But canst be sure he be worthy?”

“I thank thee, Bukisaho,” Flach said. “He be new to Phaze, and Blue wants him broken in. I know no more than this, and that he be named Lysander.”

“Thy human names be e’er strange,” she said. “I would second-guess Blue not, but mayhap thou shouldst include the Adept Tania on the tour.”

“Aye, excellent notion, bitch!” the boy exclaimed, startling Lysander.

The woman, noting his reaction, laughed—and so did the surrounding wolves, in their way. “Aye, he be new!” the woman agreed.

A young wolf appeared at the fringe of our, camp. “Sirelmo!” Flach cried, spying it.

The wolf charged him, leaped into the air with teeth bared— and became a girl about his age, smacking into the boy with her mouth against his for an extremely solid kiss. Her hair was dark, like his, as were her furry jacket and skirt; she could have been his sister, but obviously wasn’t.

After an intense moment, she drew back her head but not her body. The two might be children, but they looked much like lovers, Lysander thought. “O Barel, it be but days but it feels like years!” the

girl said. "I feel my age drawing nigh, any year now; be thou ready when I be!"

"But once we mate, we part!" he protested. "I be in no hurry for that, Sirel."

"We will part not, only turn to friendship."

He nodded. "Aye. Still, I be not rushed."

"I will make thee rush, when my heat come," she promised.

They were like lovers! They were talking of mating!

"This be Lysander," Flach said, turning to him as the girl released him. "He be a new serf for Blue."

"Pleased to meet thee, Lysan," the girl said. "Thou hast no Phaze form?"

"No Phaze form," Lysander agreed.

"Then I assume mine other form, to greet thee," Sirel said—and abruptly a wheeled machine sat in her place. "I am Troubot, the trouble-shooting robot," it said via a speaker. "I love Nepe, but I fear my love is vain."

"Oh, I don't know," Nepe said, appearing, naked as she had been in the dome. "But unless you want to put on a humanoid body like Daddy's—"

The wolf-girl reappeared. "It be more fun being a bitch."

Bitch: a female dog or wolf. Now Lysander had it straight.

"I must on," Flach said. The changes were so quick and natural that it seemed pointless to try to track them. "We be going to see Tania."

Sirel frowned cutely. "Thou knowest I like thee not with that woman." The way she said it, "woman" sounded the way "bitch" did away from Phaze.

"Dost forget she played the Flute, that we might beat the e'il Adepts?" Flach inquired, smiling.

"Nay, I forget that not, neither her power."

“Which she would waste not on me,” he retorted.

Sirelmoba relented. “Aye, why waste anything on thee!”

He made a grab for her, but she turned wolf again and glided away. Flach turned wolf himself, and growled after her, then reappeared as the boy. “Come, Lysan,” he said, extending his hand.

Lysander took it—and they were at the base of another section of the Purple Mountains. Partway up was a pleasant cottage, with a thatched roof and plaster walls. An easy path led up to it.

“If I may inquire,” Lysander said cautiously, “what is significant about the Adept Tania?”

“She has the power o’ the Evil Eye,” Flach explained as they walked up the path. “When her brother were the Tan Adept, and sought to destroy what Grandpa Blue had wrought, she fought for us, and helped us prevail, and now she be the Adept while Tan be prisoner.”

“But why should I see her? I am of no significance.”

The lad glanced at him with a disturbing hint of understanding. “Blue takes serfs not for naught, and sends them to Phaze not for naught. Least does he put us”—Nepe flashed momentarily, showing that he meant the combination—“in charge of such, e’en for an hour, without reason. It be our task not merely to show thee magic, but to fathom thy nature. Tania will do that.”

“Fathom my nature? I’m an android!”

“But what is thy mind, Lysan? Thinkst thou to step into the Blue Demesnes unchallenged? An thou be sent to assassinate Blue, needs must we know it early.”

“I’m no assassin!” Lysander protested, appalled.

“An we take thy word on that, be we smart?”

“I see your point. So Tania will know? What is she, a mind reader?”

“Not exactly. She will compel thee with her Eye, which be not truly e’il now, and thou willst tell thy nature.”

Lysander felt a chill. If the woman could do that, he was lost! But perhaps it was a bluff. What could a child know, after all?

They completed the ascent to the cottage. Flach knocked on the door. “Adepts, this be Flach! I bring a serf from Proton-frame.”

The door opened. A beautiful woman of about thirty stood within, in a tan dress. Her hair was tan, and her eyes too. Suddenly the significance of the name registered. Tan, Tania. The color was a badge.

“Welcome, Flach,” she said smiling. “We be e’er pleased to see thee, and any thou dost bring.” She glanced at Lysander—and he felt another chill. Her eyes abruptly seemed larger, and intense, as though capable of hideous power. “Come in.” She stepped back to give them access.

Inside was a pleasant room with a picture-window view of the mountainside and open field beyond. There was also a man, somewhat older than Tania, bespectacled and of slight build, though healthy. Lysander realized that he must have qualities that didn’t show, to be the companion of such a woman.

Flach performed the introductions. “This be Lysander, new serf o’ Blue, from offplanet. This be the Adept Clef.”

Clef walked forward to shake hands. “Welcome to Phaze, Lysander. What brings you here?”

Was there any point in telling his story? But he realized that all he could do was bluff it out. “I am an android, trained in games and computer feedback circuitry. I hope to achieve both pleasure and information during my tenure here, and money too, so as to be a person of account on my home planet when I return.”

“Yes, I remember my own tenure as a serf,” Clef said. “When I washed out in the game, I thought to depart Proton, never to return. But Stile showed me Phaze, and later Tania brought me back.” He went to the woman and put his arm around her affectionately. She turned immediately and kissed him with an eagerness reminiscent of that of Alyc. But she was no Alyc; what was it that made Clef a figure to compel her devotion?

“Methought Tania could test Lysander, to be assured of his constancy,” Flach said. “We like strangers not around Blue.”

Again Tania glanced at Lysander. She shifted subtly. “Why not put him on a lie detector?” she asked.

“If he’s an assassin,” Nepe said, “he would be trained to fake through that. But he can’t fake you, Citizen.”

Lysander realized that Tania had shifted to her Proton form, which was evidently the same as her Phaze form. So she was also a Citizen! That meant that she had enormous power, if she chose to exercise it, despite her rustic residence.

“You know my wife does not like to use her power carelessly,” Clef said. “She can orient on a given subject only once.”

“Gee, I forgot,” Nepe said, abashed. “I was thinking it was like the weres or ‘corns, always there.”

“Always there for a new subject,” Clef said. “If there is any chance that Stile might want him checked at a later date, we should wait on that. But perhaps I can be of service, instead.”

“Would you, dear?” Tania asked, evidently relieved.

“For you, anything,” Clef said. He seemed to be speaking literally. He walked across the room and fetched an instrument from a shelf.

Lysander wasn’t sure whether to feel relief or increased concern. These people obviously intended to check him out—but how did they propose to do it? Nepe was right: no lie detector would betray him; he had been manufactured to be resistant to the human signals such machines interpreted. Only a direct mind probe could fathom his truth, and his masters had not anticipated that on this planet. In immediate retrospect, he realized that he had blundered into accepting employment directly with Citizen Blue; of course the man was careful about his associates, being the leading figure of the planet! Had Lysander sought employment with a lesser Citizen, he should have passed unnoticed. He had asked for trouble, and now was getting it.

The instrument turned out to be a shining silver flute. No, not silver—platinum. This was the Platinum Flute the unicorn Belle had mentioned, that Clef had played to merge the frames. That had seemed like mythology, but now it seemed literal. But what could a flute really do?

“Sit down,” Tania said, indicating chairs and taking one herself. “It’s always such a pleasure to hear him play.”

“Aye,” Flach agreed. “Ne’er heard I the like!”

Lysander did not anticipate pleasure. If the Flute really could somehow fathom his mind, it would be the end of him. Yet maybe it was illusion or bluff.

Clef played. It was immediately evident that he was an expert flautist; the music was sure and sweet. But how could mere music verify whether a man was an assassin? Of course that was not the case with Lysander; he was merely a counterinsurgency agent, who would kill only at need. He liked Citizen Blue and his family, and would do his best to avoid doing them harm, so long as his mission was fairly accomplished. Still, the premature exposure of his mission would be fatal to it and probably himself.

The music intensified. Lysander felt it orienting on him, entering him, drawing him out of himself. It was as if he were floating up and looking down at his body and the bodies of the others. But he wasn't dying, he was relaxing; it was pleasant. He would be satisfied to float forever on this magical music!

But if they had intended to make him talk about his true mission, they had failed. He felt no compulsion at all to talk about anything, merely to float and reflect. So he could relax, until the Hectare came. Then—he would see.

The music ended. Lysander thought it had been only a minute or two, but the sun seemed to have jumped forward in the sky beyond the picture window. It had been at least an hour. That music was potent!

The others were silent as Clef put away his flute. They seemed to be recovering from the effect of it, just as he was.

“Did I pass inspection?” he inquired, trying to be light.

Clef turned to him. “I suspect you are the one we want. It is fortunate that Citizen Blue hired you.”

“For work on circuit feedback?”

“There is a prophecy that a great trial will come to our culture, that can be ameliorated only by a particular person, a newcomer to the planet. We have been watching for promising arrivals. The music suggests that you qualify. I hope it is correct.”

“A prophecy?” Lysander asked, surprised again. “A magical prediction?”

“You might call it that. Actually, prophecies are more difficult to assimilate, as they are often vague about details, and considerable interpretation is needed. But they are always correct in the end. If you are the one, you will be invaluable to us.”

Lysander spread his hands. “Somehow that seems like more than I should be credited with. I ‘m really not a planet-saving type.”

“Perhaps.” Clef shrugged as if unconcerned. “It was pleasant to play again, at any rate.”

“It was fun to listen!” Flach said. Then Nepe appeared. “But I guess we better go on back to Grandpa Blue.” She extended her hand to Lysander.

He took it, relieved that he had gotten through their test. Evidently the magic had oriented on his special mission, but not clarified its nature. Save the culture? Not by their definition! He was on the other side.

He blinked. They were back in Citizen Blue’s apartment, all naked except for the Citizen, and Alyc was there, gazing at him expectantly. “Yes, I now believe in magic,” he said, forestalling her. “This little lady showed me quite a world!”

3 - Decision

After polite dialogue of the adult kind, Citizen Blue packed Lysander off with Alyc for the familiarization tour of Proton. But he held Nepe with the tiniest indication of a finger. She faded back, but did not depart. She had known it would be thus.

When things were clear, the Citizen held a brief meeting with Sheen, Agnes the maid, and Nepe. "Verdict?" he asked Nepe.

"Clef piped out his soul, and says he may be the one."

Blue nodded. "I thought that might be the case. His arrival was too pat. How much is Clef sure of?"

Nepe shrugged. "He didn't say, because 'Sander was there. Just that there's a prophecy, and he might qualify as the special person we want to help us get through the bad time."

Agnes snorted. "Special person! The man's an enemy agent!"

"If he is the one," the Citizen said. "And if he is the one, we desperately need him. I don't think Clef would have mentioned the prophecy if he wasn't fairly sure."

"He may be sure the man is an enemy," Sheen said, "but not that he is the one we need."

Blue nodded. "It would be premature to take action at this time. But at least we can use this as a focus for our investigation. I shall arrange to keep him occupied with the Game Computer."

Sheen pursed her lips in exactly the fashion of a living woman. "But if he is versed in computer circuitry—"

"Have no fear, my love; he will not have access to the circuitry. The Oracle will divert him cleverly enough. Meanwhile, we shall be taking his measure, and discover perhaps in exactly what way he may be useful to our effort."

Sheen nodded, satisfied. If the Oracle was working on this, there would be no errors.

Blue glanced at Nepe. "You and Nessie know what to do."

Nepe nodded. So did Agnes.

“We shall cover for you as required,” Blue concluded. “Otherwise, you’re on your own. Project Phaze Doubt depends on you.”

She laughed, though she knew it wasn’t funny. “Phased out by a little girl!”

He smiled. “Don’t get cute, amoeba face. We love you, and want you to succeed.”

How true that was! She would keep her doubt to herself, and do her utmost to complete her mission. She could not afford to dwell on its immense responsibility; she would tackle one step at a time.

Nepe went up and embraced her grandfather, then her grandmother. “Nessie will update me,” she said, wiping away a tear.

“And so will we, while we can,” the Citizen said. “Until Alyc turns us in.”

Another laugh bubbled up in Nepe, despite the gravity of the situation. “Maybe she’ll turn him in too!”

“Maybe,” Blue said, smiling.

Then Nepe took Agnes’ hand. “Follow my lead, Grandam.”

The woman nodded. Nepe changed to Flach and conjured the two of them to a vacant chamber across the city. There she reverted to Nepe-form, and melted into a pool of protoplasm. Agnes, who was Nepe’s mother’s elder portion, melted with her. Soon the two Moebites were flowing across the floor, and into a disused drain channel.

I don’t think anyone’s watching. Nepe thought, her direct contact with a creature of her species making communication possible, though they were not telepathic. It was simply a matter of tangential nerve signals. But we don’t know how many other spies there are, or when the invasion’s coming, so we have to be careful.

Agreed.

This leads outside, near a horse range. Flach’ll be a horsefly, till we get to Clef.

Just don’t bite me!

Nepe sent a peal of laughter that jarred loose the contact.

They flowed out of the pipe and settled on the ground. It had been seeded after the merge, but the grass had not yet filled in completely near the dome.

Nepe shaped herself back into girl form, hiding against the wall, then became Flach, who would have had trouble dealing with puddle form. The mutability of the Moeba complemented that of the Adept, each able to change in ways the other could not. They found it best to assume human form at the exchange platform, to avoid miscues.

Flach became the horsefly. He buzzed up, looking around with his multifaceted eyes. There were horses grazing not far off, attended only by a mobile watering station.

He buzzed down to Agnes. He touched her briefly and sheered off.

She was more facile than he in the change, having had more experience. She went directly from pooled protoplasm to unicorn, standing in the shadow, where her black hide helped her fade out. She had white socks on her hind legs, and a spiraled horn. She was Neysa, the Adept Stile's longtime companion, and perhaps the one who knew Flach best.

Flach flew down to light on her head, between her ears. She walked beside the wall until the site of their emergence from it was not clear, then turned outward. She put her head down to take a bite of grass, so that the watering robot would see the outline of a grazing horse. After a moment she moved on, keeping her horn angled away from the machine.

In this manner she worked her way to the fringe of the seeded turf. Then she stepped out onto the natural ground of Phaze, and quickly lost herself in the higher bushes growing there. Once she was fully clear of the dome of Hardom, she worked into a trot, moving at moderate speed westward, then southwest, toward the great Purple Mountain Range. If anyone saw her now, she was just one more unicorn traveling her own course, like so many who ranged out from the Herd to find choice foraging.

As afternoon closed they came to the mountains. Flach remained in fly form, taking no chances. Even if it wasn't necessary right now, it was good policy for the future.

As they neared the residence of Clef and Tania, Flach buzzed off

Neysa's head, and she assumed her third form: a firefly. As horsefly and firefly, they buzzed up to the cottage. They flew to the picture window, and Flach banged against it several times, making a noise.

In a moment Tania spied him. She nodded, and opened a smaller window. The two flew in, lighted on the floor, and assumed their human forms.

"We were expecting you," Clef said, joining them.

"I be glad to see thee here, our past differences done," Tania said separately to Neysa.

"Thou didst shame me to forgiving my filly," Neysa responded to her.

"Because I loved Bane—and Fleta," Tania said. "Before Clef came, and fulfilled my life."

"It was mutual," Clef said. "Now I suspect you want my full report on the visitor."

"Grandpa Blue has put us on alert," Nepe said, taking over from Flach. She was better at talking, and at Proton matters. "But he needs to know more before he acts."

"I am as yet not adept, as it were, at reading souls," Clef said. "But there is no doubt in my mind that Lysander is a hostile agent. He appears to mean no personal ill to us, but his loyalty is to a foreign power. When that power strikes, he will support it."

"Yes, Grandpa Blue is investigating his origin. He'll find out who 'Sander works for. But since the prophecy says that only the right one can save us, that won't be enough. We have to know if he's the one."

"Exactly," Clef said. "The difficulty is that Lysander doesn't know the answer himself. That is why I mentioned the prophecy. I hoped to elicit some reaction that would clarify the matter. But there seemed to be only perplexity."

"Exactly what is the prophecy, and what does it say?" Tania inquired. "I had not heard of it before."

"Trool came across it in the Book of Magic," Clef said. "He had seen it before, but it wasn't relevant to the immediacies of prior situations, and there is so much in that book that he ignored it. But when we merged the frames, he remembered, and spoke of it to a few of us. We

did not bruit it further about, not wishing to alarm others. But suddenly its relevance is manifest. The wording is simple, just two sentences: 'When frames merge, comes a time of great trial. Only one alien to the culture and opposed can save it—an he choose.' We interpret that to mean that an enemy will attack, and that a member of the enemy force can help us prevail, if we can convince him to do it."

"It could be a female," Tania pointed out.

Clef shrugged. "Yes, of course. But from offplanet, and not conversant with our ways. So we are considering Lysander, who represents an alien force. I think we dare not assume he is not the one. If other prospects appear, we must consider them too."

"Like Alyc," Nepe said.

"Yes," he said. "And any other foreign agent. If we were to eliminate any one of them, we might doom ourselves. But Alyc is human, and has adapted well to the culture, so we doubt it is her. Lysander, in contrast is an extremely sophisticated android. I would like very much to know what kind of brain he has. When I piped out his soul, the part that associated with the body was ordinary, but the pan that was the brain, and therefore the mind, was as strange as I have seen. Certainly it is alien! So Lysander seems to be a far more likely candidate."

"If he choose," Tania said. "I might make him choose."

"You could compel him to do our bidding, dear," Clef said. "But that might destroy his usefulness. I suspect we will need his full understanding and cooperation, which would be another matter. Also, if his mind is truly alien, you might have difficulty exerting your magic on him."

She nodded, appreciating the point. "Then perhaps it is better to give him reason to support our culture. Suppose he fell in love with one of our women?"

"That has been known to achieve remarkable things in the past," Clef said with a bit of a smile.

"When my father Mach loved the unicorn filly Fleta," Flach said, "all Phaze and Proton changed."

"And when I loved Bane, I changed too," Tania said. "I know the power of love, even that which be not returned! But can an alien thing

love similarly?”

“Lysander is schooled to emulate human ways,” Clef said. “His reactions here were normal. Unless his core personality is unable to love, I think he should be normal in that respect also.”

“Then methinks we needs must find him a woman,” she said.

“He has a woman: Alyc,” Nepe said.

Neysa snorted.

Tania turned her great eyes on Nepe. “Thou knowest we must link him to one o’ our own.”

“I guess so,” Nepe agreed. “Maybe the enemy’s using Alyc to keep him in line.”

“I would tend to doubt that,” Clef said. “The most effective spies I should think would be those who do not know the identities of the others. That way, if one is discovered, he can not give away the presence of the others. I think the presence of two in Citizen Blue’s household must be coincidence—or, if not, their true natures must still be concealed from each other. So they would be unlikely to discuss the details of their conspiracy. However, if they did, Blue would soon know of it.”

“But while they are together, we can’t put one of our own with him,” Tania said.

“Alyc has a short attention span with men,” Nepe said. “Her romances seldom last longer than two or three weeks.”

“Even that might be too long,” Clef said. “We need time to work on him.”

“Choose a woman, and introduce her to him,” Tania said. “Then she’ll be there when he breaks from Alyc. She may even take him from Alyc.”

“Thou tookst Bane not from Agape,” Flach said, a trifle smugly. He knew that Tania had had four years to try, and hadn’t made a dent. Instead she had lost her own heart to Bane, until Clef won her with his magic music.

“Thy sires were one hell of a lot better men than Lysander,” Tania

said. "Lysander I could take, an I wished."

"You may have to, if our ploy fails," Clef murmured. "That's why I prevented you from using your power on him at this time. It may be needed more critically later."

Tania made a face. "I will do what I needs must do, but I loathe the prospect. Thou be not the first I loved, but thou surely be the last."

"So what woman?" Nepe asked. "A nice wolf bitch? Some of them are sexier than human women. Ask Flach."

Flach took over, embarrassed. "She be always teasing me about that. I want just to mate with my Promised, Sirelmoeba, an we come of age. But Nepe be right: meseen what a bitch can do with a grown man, an she chose."

"But an she be a dog in Proton, that be no good," Tania pointed out.

"Brown is close to the wolves," Clef said. "She should know which ones have suitable analogues."

"I know," Flach said, annoyed. "I be closer than any!"

"Of course thou dost be," Tania said. "Clef be gone from Phaze then. Who dost thou recommend?"

Now Flach was taken aback. "Actually, they be all Promised or mated, in my Pack."

"So we might as well ask Brown," she said.

He had to yield. "Aye." He looked at Neysa, who had been mostly silent, as was her wont. "But mayhap my turn to move us?"

Neysa was never keen on Adept magic, but respected it in her grandchild. She nodded, knowing that his way would be both faster and less obvious.

Flach took her hand, and conjured them both to the Brown Demesnes. A given spell could work only once, but he had devised so many variants for conjuration that this was no limitation. They landed in the massive wooden castle, in a private chamber reserved for just such events. Flach knocked rhythmically against a panel, signaling their presence.

Soon a wooden golem tramped to the door. The Brown Adept could

make them in the perfect image and manner of living folk, but around the castle she didn't bother. This one was obviously inanimate, despite its activity. "Who comes?" it demanded.

"Flach and Grandam," Flach said.

"Then follow me." The thing about-faced and led them down the hall.

The Brown Adept awaited them in the main chamber. She was a somewhat spare woman with clipped brown hair, much the color of the wood she worked with. "Ah, Flach!" she exclaimed. "And Neysa! It be good to see thee, mare!" Neysa was now in human form, but of course Brown knew her. They had been friends for thirty years, ever since Stile had met Brown when she was ten.

"We come from Clef," Flach said. "Can anyone hear?"

"Mayhap," Brown said. "I have, as thou dost know, two prisoners. They be under geis nor to harm me neither to escape, but their magic be not entirely stifled."

"Mayhap I can make a privacy spell," Flach said. "But first should I make sure where they be."

"It be near their feeding time," Brown said. "Come see them while I do it."

They followed her to the kitchen, where a golem chef had prepared a platter. "Thou dost feed them well," Flach remarked, smelling the aroma. "Pumpkinseed pie!"

"My garden be fertilized with unicorn manure," Brown replied. "From it comes the very best pumpkinseeds, so many I can do naught but bake. It were unkind to share not."

"Then share with me!" Flach said eagerly.

"Aye, lad, and gladly," she agreed. "Canst stay the night?"

"I fear not," he said. "But we can eat while we talk. E'en my grandam likes pumpkinseed pie!" He glanced at Neysa, who did not protest. It was a taste they shared.

A golem carried the platter. They followed it to the cellar, where the prisoners were housed. There were no bars, but that didn't matter; there were stout golem guards who could not be corrupted, and who

never slept.

The chambers were surprisingly pleasant. It was a well-organized suite, with curtains and cushions and pictures on the wall. One of them was a magic window which showed scenes of Phaze as desired: the unicorn range, ogre dens, ocean shore, or mountains. Flach had never understood why the Brown Adept had volunteered to house the prisoners; perhaps she had been the only one able to handle this chore. Flach's grandfather had not wished to kill them, though they deserved death; but they could not be allowed to run loose. So they were confined, and a geis suppressed their magic, and they were here for the duration.

The prisoners were ready in the main chamber. They were the Purple Adept and the Tan Adept, also being Citizen Purple and Citizen Tan, Tania's brother. Actually their titles had been stripped; Tania had assumed her brother's status, and the Purple Demesnes were vacant. But their magic remained; were it not for the geis, they would be extremely dangerous men.

Both stood as the party entered. "Good evening, Adept," Purple said. He wore a modest purple robe, and was clean and neat. He was by no means a handsome man, but might be called portly. Tan, on the other hand, was in the vigor of life, so like his twin sister in appearance and talent that it was eerie. Flach had hated both Tan and Tania, until Tania changed sides and rendered the vital help that enabled Stile/Blue to win.

"Good evening, Purple," Brown said briefly. "Good evening, Tan. Are you in satisfactory form?"

"Excellent form, Adept," Tan said. "We thank thee for thy excellent care."

The golem set down the platter. "Then I will leave you to it," Brown said. "I have company."

"So we note," Purple said, glancing at Flach. "Mayst thou prosper, Adept."

Flach didn't really like being called Adept, but it was true: he had magic enough to qualify. "Thank thee, Purple."

Tan turned his hypnotic eyes on Neysa. "And still spry, mare," he remarked. Neysa did not bother to answer.

They departed the prison section. “Now I have them placed,” Flach said, “I can set my privacy spell. They be demoted, but they be Adepts yet, in magic, else such care were not needed.”

“Nay,” Neysa said. “Needs must we go on immediately.”

Flach turned to her in surprise. “But Grandam, the pie!”

“It be excellent pie, an I do say so myself,” Brown said. “There be no need to rush on. I welcome the company.”

“Remembered I aught,” Neysa said.

Flach was perplexed and dismayed. He knew better than to naysay his grandam, though he was Adept and she was not. He would have to give up the pie.

“Have I given offense?” Brown asked, a hysterical edge sounding in her voice. “Neysa, please, I apologize—”

Neysa stopped and took Brown by the hands. “I have known thee long,” she said. “I will return alone. Needs must I now see my grandfoal to Trool. There be no offense.” It was a singularly long speech, for her.

“Thou wilt return,” Brown said. It sounded like a prayer.

“Aye.” Neysa took Flach’s hand. “On, Flach,” she said, squeezing his fingers in a way he recognized. She was serious, and would brook no delay.

He conjured them to the Red Demesnes, a similar chamber in Trool’s castle. He broached her on it immediately. “Grandam—”

“Aught be amiss,” Neysa said. “Needs must I fathom it, ere secrets be told. Conjure me back to Brown, and excuse me to Red. Say naught o’ this.”

“But Trool be—”

“To other than him,” she amended. “Send me.”

Baffled, he conjured her back. Then he knocked on the closed chamber door, to let Trool know of his arrival.

In a moment, lovely Sucheane was there. “Ah, Flach,” she said, hugging him. He always liked that, for she was not only the prettiest

woman of her age, she was one of the nicest. “Come join us at sup; we have pumpkinseed pie.”

“We lucked out!” Nepe exclaimed, taking over.

Suchevane conducted Nepe downstairs to the dining hall. There was Trool the Troll, now the Red Adept, and his son Alien. Trool lifted a finger, and abruptly Nepe was clothed in a fluffy dress. “Oh—thanks,” she said. “I forgot!”

For normally it was Nepe who visited this household, because Alien was sweet on her and she liked the attention. Originally it had been Alien’s Proton alternate, ‘Corn, who had the feeling, but it had spread to both.

The pie was served, but between mouthfuls Nepe made their mission known. It did not matter that Suchevane and Alien were present; this whole family was to be trusted.

“So thou dost need a mistress to corrupt an enemy agent,” Trool said. “Methinks that be not much in our line.”

Alien chuckled. “But an I grow up, I’ll need me a mistress,” he said, leering at Nepe.

Nepe stuck out her tongue at him. “This is all adult stuff I don’t understand,” she said. “I’m just carrying the word.”

Suchevane choked over her tomato juice, which she drank because of the color. “All thy experience emulating Troubot in Proton-frame, and thou dost ken naught?”

Nepe glanced at her with obviously faked innocence. “Won’t wash?” For Troubot, in that period, had carried the most intimate messages between Citizens, including those setting up sexual liaisons between Citizen Purple and Tania’s sexy secretary Tsetse. Troubot could hardly have been innocent of the ways of sex, since the robot also monitored the ongoing activities.

But the memory gave her a notion. “Tsetse! She’s anybody’s mistress!”

“She be old!” Alien protested. “Thirty, at least!”

“Twenty-nine plus a few months,” Suchevane said. “Just younger than Tania—and me.”

Alien shut up, knowing when to quit.

“However,” Suchevane continued, “I fear she would be ill for this purpose, for other reasons. She be a singleton—no Phaze opposite, no merging. She worked in Proton not long enough before the merge. Best we choose one firmly rooted in both cultures.”

Trool nodded agreement. His alternate had been Citizen Troal, and Suchevane’s had been the Bat Girl. They preferred the Phaze mode, but both knew Proton well and maintained their places in it.

“Also, Tsetse’s bisexual,” Nepe said. “She can make it with any man, but she prefers women. So scratch that.”

“Let me check the Book,” Trool said, getting up.

“May I come too?” Nepe asked, gulping down her last mouthful of pie and getting up.

The Adept shrugged. “An thou dost wish.”

“I’ll take thy seconds!” Alien warned her.

Nepe hesitated just long enough, then resumed her motion “It’s fattening anyway.”

In Trool’s private chamber, where he kept the phenomena] Book of Magic, the compendium of the most potent spells of Phaze, Flach took over. “There be a problem, mayhap. Adept.”

“Aye, so methought when Neysa left thee here,” Trool said.

“We were on our mission, and about to inquire of Brown, when Grandam hustled me here instead,” Flach said. “This be not her way.”

“She recognized a problem with Brown she knew not of before,” Trool said. “She realized that thy mission were not best bruited there.”

“Thou knowest?” Flach asked, not really surprised. Trool was the most versatile of the Adepts, and he made it his business to keep informed. “What be the problem?”

“It were not kind to say it,” Trool said. “But methinks Neysa be correct: until it be abated, say naught to Brown.”

“But Brown be no traitor!”

“Aye. But why burden her with more when she has much already? Question thy grandam naught on this; she be sworn to privacy, and it bear not on thy mission.”

Flach did not like being excluded from anything, but realized that he could not debate the matter with Trool and Neysa. “Then canst find a woman for ‘Sander?”

“Aye. There be a vamp seems suitable. Winsome, committed, and between men.”

Flach was gratified. Trool of course related well to the vampire community, being married to one of their number. His presence had protected the local Flock from molestation by goblins and, yes, trolls. “Who be she?”

“Jodabyle, age twenty in man years. In Proton she be named Jod’e, of android persuasion.”

“Android! And he be android!”

“Aye. So it seem a fair match.”

“Willst tell her his nature?”

“Nay. She must be innocent—but loyal.”

“But an she love him, and he betray her, what o’ her?”

“What o’ Phaze?” Trool asked in return.

Flach nodded, if this ploy failed, their entire planet might be doomed. The happiness of one person became incidental. “I follow. But I like it not.”

“Thou dost now appreciate the ugliness o’ the choice o’ the lesser evil.”

“Aye.” Flach brooded a moment, then got practical. “How may she be introduced to him?”

“We shall arrange a coincidental meeting. Till things sour with his present lady friend, that be the extent o’ it.”

“What now for me? I know not when Grandam will return.”

“Remain here, an thou wishest,” Trool said, closing the Book. “Alien

likes thy company, and Nepe's too."

"But needs must I update Grandpa Blue."

"Nay, best that thou remain clear o' him till this be done, that thy travels yield little hint o' our effort. We know not how many spies o' the enemy be among us."

"Dost know the enemy?"

"Aye. It be an alien galactic species called the Hectare. They may move within the month."

"But if we know—"

"They possess enormous power. We can oppose them not."

"But with magic—"

Trool shook his head. "We would take such losses as to make it not worthwhile, including mayhap our planet itself. They could destroy it from afar, gi'ing us ne'er a chance. We needs must depend on the prophecy. All our leading figures will be prisoner, we think not maltreated, but helpless to oppose the invader."

Flach realized that if Trool said it, it had to be true. "Then this mission with the woman be most important."

"Aye. And thy freedom be vital too. Surrender to them not."

"I have more part in this?" Flach asked, surprised.

"Aye. We depend much on thee, in both thy forms. More I may not say."

They left the chamber. Flach, troubled, let Nepe take over. He knew why Trool was not telling him more: so he could not betray others who might be pan of it, if he got caught. Just as the vamp-girl would not be told her role. At least it meant that the elders were doing what they could.

Nepe behaved in a childlike manner, except when she flirted with Alien, pretending that all was well. But she knew it wasn't. Her sleep that night was uneasy. How bad was it going to be, if all the major figures of the planet were to be taken captive? And what had bothered Neysa so much that she had interrupted even this mission to talk to Brown alone? Trool said it did not affect Nepe or Flach's own mission,

but she wasn't sure. Anything their grandam took seriously affected them.

4 - Shame

Neysa arrived back at the Brown Demesnes, in the same chamber as before. She knocked on the wall, signaling her return, and waited. In a moment Brown was there.

“I thank thee for coming back so soon,” Brown said. “I be distraught for lack o’ company.”

“Needs must we talk alone,” Neysa said. “I fear that can not be here, near the Adepts.”

“Aye. They be under geis, but they hear.”

“Will thy castle keep, in thine absence?”

“A few hours.”

“Then march us to my Herd.”

“Aye.” They walked to the front storage chamber of the castle, where assorted wooden golems stood idle. “Franken,” Brown said.

A huge and spectacularly ugly golem stirred. It was in the likeness of an ancient Earth monster said to have been crafted in a laboratory. The name was a misnomer, because it was the doctor, not the monster, who had been called Frankenstein, but for this offhand use it sufficed.

Franken picked Brown up. Neysa assumed her firefly form and flew up to perch on the golem’s head. Franken tramped out of the castle, faced the setting sun, and proceeded at cruising velocity. That was faster than a unicorn could run, because the golem was big and indefatigable. The landscape passed at a horrendous rate. To Neysa, perched on the head and hunching down to avoid the rush of wind, it seemed most like an image in Agnes’ mind: that of an airplane flying low over the terrain, coming in for a landing at a dome. Such machines were fewer now, because of concern about pollution; less wasteful means were employed to travel. But Agnes had been in Proton during the old days, and ridden such machines many times. She remembered.

At dusk they reached the spot where the Herd was grazing. Clip charged up, but recognized the golem and relaxed. Neysa flew down, assumed her nature form, and conferred with her brother in horn talk.

“Brown and I needs must converse in private for a time.”

“Graze in the center; none will hear.”

“Our thanks to thee, sibling.”

“There be an ill wind coming.”

“Aye.”

She trotted back to the golem, now waiting like the wooden statue it was. She assumed human form. “Walk with me within the Herd,” she told Brown. “Magic penetrates not there, an we will it not.”

Brown dismounted. They walked among the unicorns, who ignored them, each grazing a particular section. In the center was a broad area, already grazed.

“Thou dost be pensive, and the prisoners be flip,” Neysa said. “Be the geis slipping?”

“Nay, it be tight,” Brown said. “They can harm me not.”

“But there be aught. I felt it as we arrived, and when I saw them, I knew. Thy strait be dire. Willst tell me?”

“Mayhap I will harm myself.”

Neysa shook her head, unpleasantly perplexed. “At their behest? How can that be?”

“Willst make oath o’ silence?”

“Be it that bad?”

“Not to thee, mayhap.”

“I make the oath.” And from her proceeded a tiny ripple, barely visible in the twilight, but significant: the splash of truth.

“Then will I tell thee what may please thee not,” Brown said. “It be with relief I tell, for the secret consumes me. Yet, an thou have patience, needs must I tell it mine own way.”

“Then ride me while I graze,” Neysa said. “My patience be endless then.” She assumed her natural form.

Brown mounted her, and began to talk. Neysa listened, and let her mind clothe the narration with the details she knew. It was a tale that should have amazed her, yet somehow did not, for it answered much that would have puzzled her had she thought to ponder it.

Brown was a child of eight when she ran away from home. That was not her name then, but her name didn't matter. It wasn't because her mother beat her; all the children of her village were beaten as a matter of policy. It wasn't that she often went hungry; that too was common, when the goblins raided the village stores. It wasn't that her father intended to betroth her to a fat merchant's son; that was a satisfactory placement as such things went. It could have been that the gang of boys was making her take off her clothes and do things with them she neither understood nor enjoyed; but that happened to any girl they caught; and hardly a girl escaped at least one such session before she came of age to marry. Some had been caught many times, because their houses were beyond the lighted fringe of the village, and the boys lurked in ambush. Some even claimed to like it, though Brown suspected they were merely covering the hurt with bravado. Brown made no bones about not liking it, but it didn't matter; if they caught her, they did it. She had become canny, so had been caught only three times. She often walked home through the woods, because she liked the trees, and the trees liked her. When the boys tried to ambush her there, a tree would arrange to snap a dropped branch under one of their feet, alerting her. Then she would reroute, and avoid them, and if they set out in direct pursuit she would shinny up a tree, knowing how to do it without getting scratched. If they tried to climb after her, they would snag seemingly by accident on the twig stubs and thorns, and the tree-ants would bite them. The trees were her friends, and the trees were not the boys' friends; that made all the difference.

No, none of these things drove her out. It was when she started making things from the wood of the trees that the trouble came. Because she liked trees, she liked wood, and the trees did not mind if she took their deadwood and worked with it. She made herself a doll from an old curly knot, and it kept her company at night; they told each other stories. She fashioned a pretend dog from a twisted fragment of a stump whose roots projected like legs and a tail. She had always wanted a dog, but never had one. So she adjusted the legs, and used charcoal to paint fur, and affixed old buttons for eyes, and wooden pegs for ears, and splinters for teeth, and she had her pet. She named it Woodruff.

It was when she started taking Woodruff for walks that the trouble began. The boys ambushed her, and Woodruff growled them off. When that got around, her father got nervous. He tried to throw the dog out, but it hid under the bed and growled. He used a broom to push it out, and kicked the dog, and Woodruff bit him on the leg. So he smashed it to pieces with the axe. Brown came home from lessons and found the sundered pieces. That was when she ran away, blinded by tears, taking only her doll.

But it was evening when she left, and night in the forest. The trees did not seem nearly as friendly at night, and it was cold. Her strait, as Neysa was later to put it, was dire. She had either to return home and take her punishment, which would be horrendous, or continue on, and perhaps perish in the wilderness. She could hear big animals prowling, and was terrified.

The animals were wolves, who ranged these parts and did not get along with the villagers. But they were werewolves, and Brown was obviously a child in distress. A bitch changed to human form and took her in. When they learned that Brown had run away and would die rather than go back to the village, because her brute father had killed her pet dog, the other wolves became more friendly. But though they could succor her for a night or two, they could not keep her. She was not a were, and would not be able to hunt with the Pack. Their leader, Kurrelgyre, was in exile because he had refused to slay his aging sire in the werewolf way, and things were in disarray already.

But there was someone who might be able to take her in. He was the Brown Adept, who lived in a wooden castle not far off. "Adept!" she cried, terrified anew. Everyone knew how terrible the Adepts were.

The wolves assured her that this one was kind to animals, as was the Blue Adept. He would not hurt her, and if she did not want to stay, he might help her go to the Blue Adept, who they understood had a beautiful and kind wife, the Lady Blue.

The huge golems were a forbidding sight, but they let the bitch and girl pass. The Brown Adept was a gnarled old man, his long brown beard turning white. "But I don't know the first thing about taking care of a child!" he protested.

Brown, catching on that he was a woodworker, turned positive. "I can feed myself, if there be food," she said. "I will be not much bother, honest, if thou dost mind not my playing with thy wood dolls."

Wood dolls? The golems were huge and ugly, a sight to frighten any normal child. The Brown Adept reconsidered. Perhaps he could let her stay for a few days.

That was the start of a friendship that quickly became an apprenticeship. The Brown Adept recognized in the child the talent to work magically with wood. He had no family and there was no one to take his place. He had thought that his Demesnes would simply fade away after his death; now he saw that they could continue. He showed the girl how to fashion the wooden golems, the way their bodies were pegged together so that they could move without falling apart. He showed her how to supervise the existing golems in their foraging for the proper kinds of wood. No live tree was ever taken, but a freshly dead one was harvested as soon as possible, so that the wood would not rot.

Soon she made another wooden dog—only instead of adapting this one from a gnarled stump, she made it from solid wood, with strong and jointed pegs. He showed her how to make the dog heel at her command, so that it would not bite anyone unless she told it to. As for her doll—that had been his first clue that she had the necessary talent, because it had taken him years to make his golems talk, yet she had done it with her first one.

It was a great time, for a year. But the Adept was old and growing older. He had been hanging on to his health with the help of amulets he had traded from the Red Adept, but even these could not keep him going forever. “I am going to die,” he told her. “Thou must be the Brown Adept. Do not let others know I be gone, until thou hast grown into thy full strength, else they may try to destroy these Demesnes in thy weakness.”

“But I be not ready!” she protested tearfully. “Thou must live longer, Grandpa Brown!” For so she called him now, having adopted him in lieu of the family she had thrown away.

“Alas, I can not,” he told her. “But this I needs must say: thou has made my last year a delight, and banished my loneliness. For that I thank thee, lovely child.”

“Thou has been good to me too!” she said. “Ne’er didst thou beat me or starve me or do to me what the village louts did.”

“An I had known o’ those things, I would have sent my golems into the village to slay those evil folk,” he said, grimacing.

“Grandpa Brown, I beg thee, leave me not!”

He squeezed her firm little hand in his worn brown hand. “It were not my choice, O sweet girl.” Then he died.

She wept. Then she told a big golem to take him out and bury him under the garden. It was the onset of her Adept status—and her awful loneliness, which he had unwittingly bequeathed to her.

She had her doll and dog and the other golems for company, but none of them were alive. She did not dare let it be known that the old Adept was gone, for fear of an attack by others, as he had warned her. She didn’t even tell the werewolves, though they were her friends; she pretended she was merely running errands for her master, who was busy making more golems. She managed, but she wasn’t happy.

So it was for a year. She learned to make and handle the golems better, but knew she had more to learn. She longed for living company, but even when she dealt with others, trading golems for food and other staples (in the name of her master), she never got personal. She didn’t dare.

Then the Blue Adept raided her Demesnes. At first she was afraid of him, and tried to drive him out, but he destroyed her defenses with his magic and had her at his mercy. But then he turned out to be a nice person, and helped her. He had somehow thought that she was a bad Adept who had attacked him, because one of the golems had been fashioned in his likeness and tried to take his place. He was a very small man who called himself Stile, and he was even newer as an Adept than she was. He had a small unicorn with him, the first she had met up close, and she was nice too. Her horn sounded like a harmonica, and her music was wonderful.

“And that were the onset o’ our friendship, Neysa,” she said. “Thirty years gone. Much has it meant to me.”

Neysa, grazing, blew an affirmative note. She remembered their meeting, but had never heard it from Brown’s point of view before.

“I were just ten then, but suddenly I knew love,” Brown continued. “I loved the Adept Stile, but kept it secret, knowing it were laughable. He had the Lady Blue.”

“I loved him too,” Neysa said in horn talk. “And I an animal.”

“Child and animal—how could we compete?” Brown asked

rhetorically, and Neysa agreed.

Stile went on about his business, in due course, destroying the Red Adept, who had killed his other self. In those days only a person who had lost his otherframe self could cross between the frames; that was why Stile had been able to cross from Proton. Then Stile became a Citizen in Proton, and the Contrary Citizens opposed him, as well as the Adverse Adepts. Brown of course helped him all she could. She would have done anything for him, but he treated her with perfect courtesy like the child she was, never knowing her love. Finally he saved the frames from the depredations of the bad Citizens and Adepts by separating Phaze from Proton. He restored the body of his other self, the original Blue Adept, and made ready to return to Proton and to the robot lady Sheen, who loved him (of course!) but whom he did not love. (How could he love any other, with the Lady Blue? How well they all understood!) Here it was that Brown betrayed him in her fashion. She had temporary access to the great Book of Magic, and made a spell to reverse things so that it was Blue who went to Proton, and Stile who stayed in Phaze, where he longed to be.

There, separated, the frames remained, for about twenty years, until Stile's son Bane exchanged places with his other self, the robot Mach. That set off a complicated sequence, and renewed the warfare between Citizens and Adepts, as the bad ones tried to grab po